

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Geneva is one of the smallest cantons in Switzerland, yet it is one of the most populated. As a member of the Confederation, it benefits from a certain amount of autonomy, reflected in its institutions – some of which are unique – summarised in this book.

The Grand Council (parliament), the Cantonal government, the judiciary, the councils and committees of Geneva's 45 municipalities, as well as those concerned with maintaining neighbourly relations with France, all strive to ensure that everything in this two-hundred-year-old canton runs smoothly.



In a country where the regions hold most of the power, it is essential for anyone intending to play their part in democracy to first understand the various political institutions in their canton and municipality.

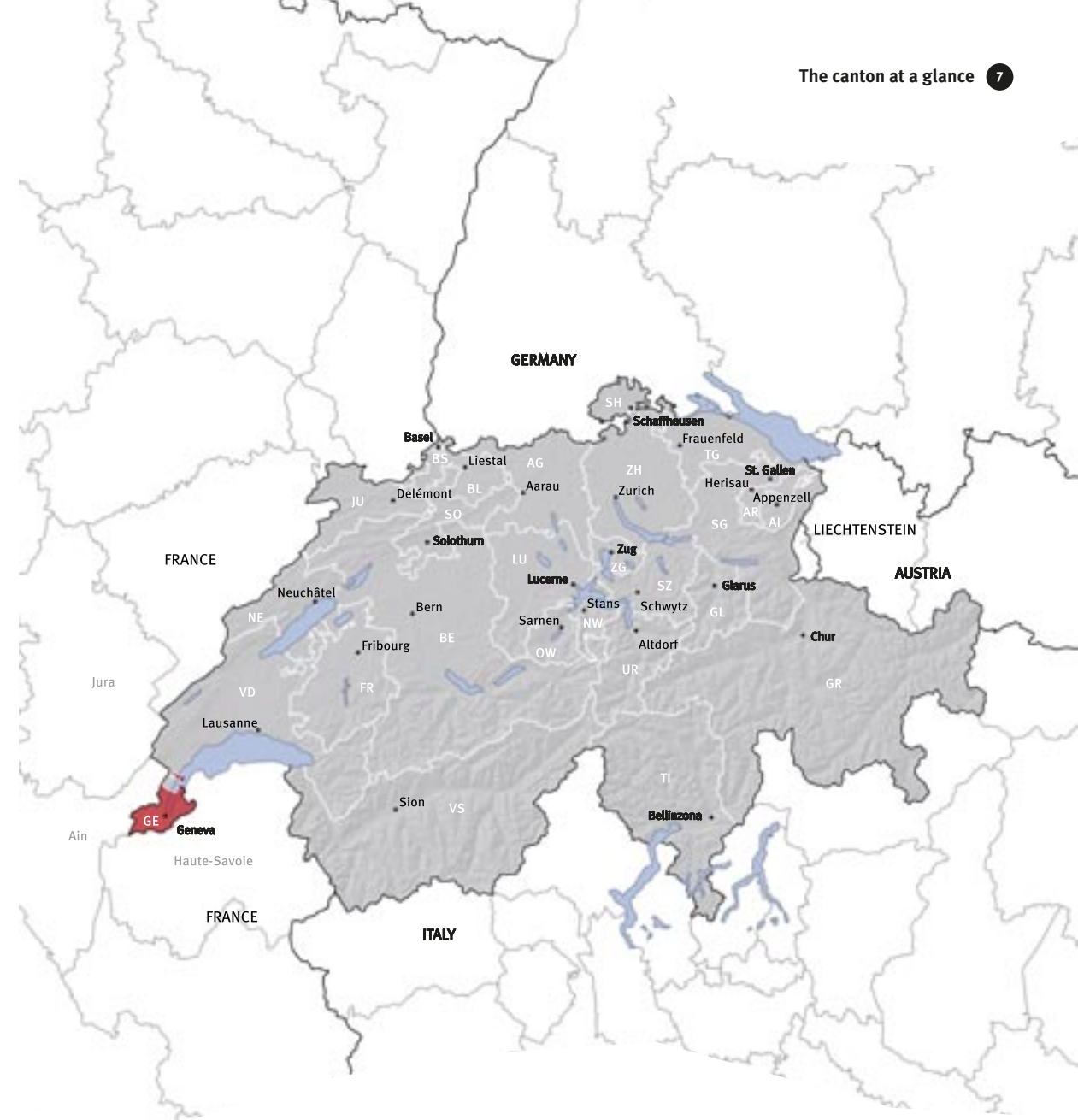
Showing interest in your canton, its history and how its institutions are run, is a way of empowering you to become involved in its development and in the decisions that will shape its future.



The canton at a glance

The canton of Geneva is the second most populated canton in French-speaking Switzerland, yet the smallest in terms of surface area.

		
	Geneva	Switzerland
Capital city	Geneva	Bern
Surface area	282 km ²	41,285 km ²
Population	507,000	8,604,000
Foreigners	40%	25.3%
Official language(s)	French	German, French, Italian, Romansh
Religions	Catholic 34.3% Protestant 9.4% Muslim 5.9% Jewish 1% Other religions 7.3% Of no faith 39% Unknown 3.1%	Catholic 35.2% Protestant 23.1% Muslim 5.3% Jewish 0.2% Other religions 6.9% Of no faith 28% Unknown 1.3%
Gross domestic product 2018	51.8 billion Swiss francs	690 billion Swiss francs
Highest point	Monniaz (Jussy): 516 m	Pointe Dufour (VS): 4,634 m
Lowest point	Chancy: 336 m	Lake Maggiore (TI): 195 m
Number of municipalities	45	2,202
Smallest municipality	Chêne-Bourg: 1.3 km ²	Rivaz (VD): 0.31 km ²
Largest municipality	Satigny: 18.9 km ²	Scuol (GR): 439 km ²
Least populated municipality	Gy: 488 inhabitants	Corippo (TI): 11 inhabitants
Most populated municipality	Geneva: 205,372 inhabitants	Zurich: 434,008 inhabitants
Road network	1,357 km	71,513 km



A brief history of the canton

A city is born
The Church and the citizens
Towards revolutions
A canton is born
Radicalism triumphs
'Red' Geneva
Stability and openness
In our time



40,000 BCE–1032 CE

A city is born

The first inhabitants of the canton of Geneva as we know it today settled on the lakeshore. The Helvetians, Romans, Burgundians and Franks followed in their footsteps.



The depths of Geneva harbour are full of wooden posts from the times when there were many villages on stilts along the lakeshore. They date back to various prehistoric times (the Neolithic and the Bronze Age). Fifteen such pile dwellings have been listed in the canton, some better preserved than others. Three of them (in Versoix, Corsier and Collonge-Bellerive) were classed as UNESCO World Heritage sites in 2011.

The first “Genevese”

- The first traces of human activity in the Geneva area date back some 40,000 years (or even 70,000 years according to some sources). Archaeological remains have been found 25 km from Geneva in a cave in Baré à Onnion (France) proving that hunters were in the area. After the last glaciation, reindeer hunters returned to the area around the Salève mountain, between 12,000 and 10,000 BCE.
- In the Neolithic (between 4000 and 2500 BCE), a group of farmers settled on the shores of Lake Geneva to grow cereals (wheat, barley, millet) and rear animals (bovines, pigs, sheep, goats). The remains of dwellings found under the Temple de Saint-Gervais are the oldest trace of human activity on the land where the City of Geneva stands today.
The production of polished stone axes, flint arrowheads and ceramics started at this time.
- During this same period, many pile dwellings were built on Geneva’s lakefront, only to be swamped when the water level rose. A few centuries later, the Bronze Age (between 1800 and 850 BCE) brought new lakeside settlements.
- It appears that the first urban area was a Celtic oppidum (fortified enclosure) that dates back to the La Tène culture (between 450 and 50 BCE). Before the Romans took hold of Geneva, the Rhône river marked the boundary between the territories of two Celtic groups, the **Allobroges** (on the left riverbank) and the Helvetians (on the right riverbank).



Roman Genua

- The Allobroges succumbed to the Romans from 121 BCE. Geneva became the Roman Empire’s bridgehead on Gallic territory. In 58 BCE, the Romans came to **Genua** and destroyed the bridge over the Rhône river to curb the Helvetians’ migration westward.
- The Romans advanced and pushed the border. Nonetheless, Geneva remained an important commercial crossroads at the junction between major communication routes: rivers (southward), lakes (northward and towards Germania) and roads (to Milan, Lyon and Vienna). At first a mere vicus (the smallest unit of Roman administration), Genua became a civitas (city) in the 3rd century. Its political stability and economic prosperity opened up the city and contributed to its development.

Politically speaking, Geneva was administered by local aristocracy following orders from the Roman Empire.



Julius Caesar was the first to officially put the name Geneva – Genua – in writing. It appears in his famous *Commentaries on the Gallic War (Bellum Gallicum)*, where the general talks of his arrival in the city to block the Helvetians. According to some historians, the name is of Gaulish origin and would mean ‘the mouth of the river’. Others believe it to be Ligurian or of Illyrian origin (like Genoa, in Italy) and a reference to the presence of water.

Burgundians and Franks

- With the ever more rapid decline of the Roman Empire, Geneva suffered the consequences of Germanic invasions. Thanks to an alliance, in 443 the city became the first capital of the kingdom of Burgundy, which covered an area from Lake Neuchâtel to the Lyon region. Turf wars led to the city and its cathedral being ravaged by fire. The cathedral was rebuilt in 515.
- In 534, Geneva fell to the Franks and things stayed as such until the 9th century (Merovingians, then Carolingians). After the collapse of Charlemagne’s empire, the city finally became part of the second Kingdom of Burgundy (888), before joining the Holy Roman Empire when the last king of Burgundy passed away in 1032.



1032–1602

The Church and the citizens

The Genevèse gradually set themselves free from the bishop's political power, established a republic and launched a Protestant Reformation.



Geneva's coat of arms was created in 1446. It comprises an eagle wearing a crown (symbolising the empire) and Saint Peter's golden key (symbolising the Genevèse diocese). The sun above it is embellished with the letters IHS, short for IHESUS (Jesus). The motto *Post Tenebras Lux* (light after darkness) was added during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century.

An episcopal city

- Geneva became a **diocese** when its first cathedral was built in the late 4th century. The bishop gradually imposed his rule over the city. He was the head of both spiritual and temporal power. When Geneva joined the Holy Roman Empire in 1032, the bishop's status went from strength to strength: He was named lord of the city and, later, prince of the empire.
- In the Middle Ages, secular lords kept on contesting the bishop's rights. Genevèse counts were the first to go up in arms, then Savoy dukes joined the dispute. The latter increased their hold on the episcopal city from the 13th century onwards.

The municipality of Geneva

- The boom of Geneva's trade fairs coincided with the rise of a movement within the municipality. In 1309, citizens (merchants and artisans) gained the right to join forces to defend their cause. They created an assembly and this **General Council** (*Conseil général*) elected its officials, the *syndics*. These formed the **Small Council** (*Petit Conseil*), which eventually became the Cantonal government.

- In 1387, bishop Adhémar Fabri acknowledged their "liberties and concessions". A charter laid out the scope of authority between the Church and the community of citizens, and outlined rules regarding civil justice, security, and certain trades.



A step towards Switzerland

- The Burgundian Wars (1474–1477) brought Geneva closer to the victorious Swiss cantons. Despite repression, the Eidgenots' cause to support the Confederates against Savoy continued to progress. In 1526, Geneva combined forces with Bern and Fribourg, thus avoiding the threat of annexation by Savoy.

In 1519, the bishop ordered Philibert Berthelier, leader of the Eidgenots, to be beheaded.

- The municipality was freed of episcopal power. Alongside the Small Council, Geneva gained a **Council of Two Hundred** (*Conseil des Deux-Cents*), which later became the Grand Council (*Grand Conseil*), i.e. the cantonal parliament (p. 56). It was a closed circuit: The two councils appointed each other, creating a sort of aristocratic regime. The bishop no longer held judicial power.

The Protestant republic

- The 16th century heralded two revolutions: a political one and a religious one. The break from the prince-bishop in 1534 turned Geneva into a sovereign republic. Its authorities approved the **Protestant Reformation** in 1536. Jean Calvin arrived in Geneva, only to be evicted, but returned in 1541. He went on to have an enormous influence on religion, politics and culture.

The Reformation Wall, built in 1909 in the Parc des Bastions, portrays four people who played a key role during the Reformation: Guillaume Farel, Jean Calvin, Théodore de Bèze and John Knox.

- The Church was reorganised, but that was not all. The political edicts proclaimed in 1543 (some of which were written by Calvin), served as Geneva's Constitution. They validated the institutions the municipality had set up, but also strengthened oligarchy.

The Small Council and the Council of Two Hundred were given more power than the General Council.

- Facing pressure from the surrounding Catholic powers, the city walled itself in. Geneva forsook some of its outskirts and cut itself off from its hinterland. It also became a 'city of refuge' and welcomed several waves of persecuted Protestants, especially French and Italians.

Between 1535 and 1562, the population of Geneva (city) increased from around 10,000 to 23,000 inhabitants.



Calvin's city, Protestant Rome, Kalvingrad... Geneva's nicknames reflect its history. **Calvin**, the great reformer and founder of the University (*Académie*) and College (*Collège*), is also renowned for his austere regime. His ecclesiastic ordinance stipulated that "Nobody is allowed to dance, except at a wedding, or to sing dishonest songs, or to wear a disguise (...)". Gambling and prostitution were forbidden. It is therefore quite ironic that Grisélidis Réal, a well-known prostitute and author, buried in the *Cimetière des Rois* in 2009, now lies very close to Calvin's grave.



1602–1798

Towards revolutions

Whereas the events of the Escalade curbed further Savoyard threats, oligarchic power was defied from within. This was the beginning of a long journey towards equal rights.



Under the *Ancien Régime*, the population was split into several categories. Noble families monopolised power and were known as the 'negatives' owing to their reluctance for change. The 'citizens' and the middle-class 'bourgeois' benefitted from political rights, but demanded the electoral body have greater responsibility. The 'inhabitants' and their descendants, the 'natives', had no political rights and were excluded from prestigious trades. During the 18th century, they outnumbered the citizens and the bourgeois. Countryfolk were known as the 'subjects'.

The Escalade

- Bolstered by the religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics, tension between Geneva and Savoy resurfaced in the late 16th century and reached a climax during the night of the *Escalade* (the French term for climbing walls). On the night of 11 to 12 December 1602, the Savoyards launched a surprise attack by scaling the city walls with ladders. After much fighting, the assault proved a failure.

A 29-year-old soldier by the name of Isaac Mercier became a Genevese hero by cutting the rope holding up the portcullis of the Porte Neuve (the main gate) thus closing the city off and saving it from enemy troops.

- The events had quite an impact in Europe and, the following day, Geneva called for military aid from its allies in Bern, Zurich and France. The Treaty of Saint Julien, signed in 1603, finally forced Savoy to recognise Geneva's independence.

An annual festival commemorates the victorious night of the Escalade. Tradition dictates that cauldrons made of chocolate are smashed in memory of Mère Royaume, who poured hot soup out of her window onto a Savoyard soldier scaling the city walls.

Tenuous prosperity

- Geneva's economic prosperity was fed by the textile industry and later by the rise of clock and watchmaking, and gold and silver smithery. This affluence stalled during the 17th century, with three epidemics of the plague and successive poor harvests making food scarce. Between 1615 and 1654, Geneva lost nearly a quarter of its population, declining from 16,000 to 12,300 inhabitants.
- Things brightened up during the latter half of the century, especially with the arrival of a new wave of Protestant refugees from France (aka **Huguenots**) after their religion had been banished there (Edict of Nantes revoked in 1685). These refugees helped boost Geneva's economy, with its main sectors being clock and watchmaking, the printed textile industry (*indiennes*), and banking.

Troubled times

- The 18th century was marked by a spate of political upheaval, a sign of growing resistance to the ruling oligarchy. The citizens and the bourgeois were the first to protest, calling for the General Council to have more influence in decision-making.
- There were several bursts of uproar:
 - the case of Pierre Fatio (1707), a lawyer executed for leading a revolt
 - the 'buffering affair' (1734–1738), when the citizens rebelled against the levying of new taxes to renovate the fortifications
 - the Rousseau case (1762–1768), following the government's condemnation of his treatises on the nature of education (*Emile, or On Education*) and on the principle of political rights (*The Social Contract*).

The Geneva revolutions

- At the end of the 18th century, it was the turn of the natives (who did not have any citizenship rights) to claim more privileges. During the aborted revolution of 1782, the prelude to the fall of the *Ancien Régime*, they seized power by force of arms, until foreign armies intervened (Bern, France, Sardinia).

The insurgents were repressed and an 'edict of pacification', known as the 'black code' (Code noir), restricted civil liberties and the prerogatives of the General Council.

- The turmoil resurfaced with the momentum of the 1789 **French Revolution**. Countryfolk joined forces with the natives calling for an end to the *Ancien Régime*. The rebellion rumbled on. In 1792, the government finally gave in to the pressure of the 'equalisers' demanding equal rights. Provisional committees were set up until the constitution was adopted in February 1794. This introduced the separation of power, and universal voting rights for adult males.

*In the summer of 1794, Geneva lived a moment of terror in the Parc des Bastions when revolutionary courts condemned 11 partisans of the *Ancien Régime* to be shot. Four extremist revolutionaries were also executed shortly thereafter.*



Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva in 1712, but only lived there for sixteen years. However, the history of this philosopher of the Enlightenment remains linked to Calvin's city. There was no love lost between Rousseau and Geneva: In 1762, the Small Council condemned two of his texts – *Emile, or On Education* and *The Social Contract*. A political crisis ensued, and Rousseau renounced his Genevese citizenship. The writer was only reinstated several decades later, notably when a statue was erected in his honour in 1834, on the island that now bears his name, in front of the Mont-Blanc bridge.



1798–1841

A canton is born

After fifteen years of French occupation, Geneva regained its independence, increased its territory and joined the Swiss Confederation.

The French occupation

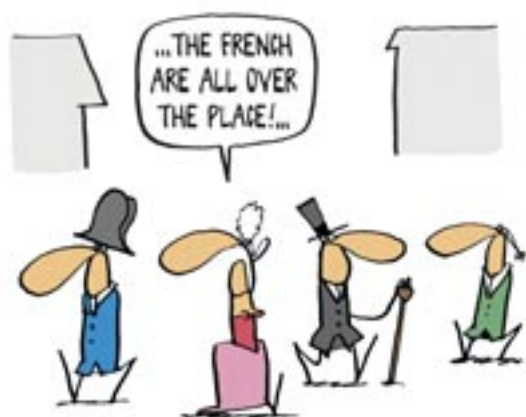
- Shortly after its revolution, Geneva came under pressure from France, keen to expand. On 15 April 1798, Calvin's city was forced to accept annexation by its neighbouring country. The French army stormed the city.

Geneva became the capital, then the prefecture, of the Département du Léman, which encompassed the Pays de Gex, the Chablais, Faucigny and the northern Geneva area.

- The hospital, the Church, the College and the University maintained their autonomy, but the arsenals and fortifications fell into French hands. They shook up the judicial system and laws. Geneva lived under three successive French regimes: the Directory, the Consulate and the Napoleonic Empire.

The Restoration

- The fall of Napoleon I in Europe brought an end to French occupation. The independence of the republic of Geneva was restored and, on the initiative of several Genevese patricians including **Ami Lullin** and **Joseph des Arts**, it was declared on 31 December 1813.
- Geneva had to face reality: The future of Calvin's city would only be secured if it joined the Swiss Confederation. For this to happen, Geneva had to fulfil two conditions:
 - open up and unify its territory, which was fragmented at that time and did not border Switzerland
 - adopt a conservative constitution, in keeping with federal requirements.



For Geneva to join Switzerland was not plain sailing. At first, the former elites were reticent about the Republic losing its independence. For a long time, the Catholic cantons were not in favour of it either, especially after the troubles in the 18th century. However, the accession was vital, as Napoleon's powerful enemies, especially the Austrians who had been occupying Geneva for several months, saw it as a way of blocking the emperor. The Genevese also feared the return of the French more than anything else.

A new constitution

Geneva adopted the 1814 Constitution somewhat reluctantly as it marked a clear setback for democracy:

- Selective suffrage was reinstated: Only the privileged few and men over 25 years of age could vote, on the condition they had paid their poll tax.
- The General Council was replaced by the Representative Council (*Conseil représentatif*) with 250 members.
- The newly created Cantonal government (*Conseil d'État*, the executive power) consisted of 28 members, elected for life by the Representative Council, which they were also part of.



Geneva, a Swiss canton

Geneva's formal accession to the Confederation happened in several stages:

- On 1 June 1814, 300 soldiers from Solothurn and Fribourg descended on the Port-Noir in very high spirits. Their arrival was at the request of the Cantonal government and had been accepted by the Federal Diet (intercantonal delegate assembly), even before the accession had been agreed.
- On 12 September 1814, the Federal Diet voted in favour of Geneva entering the Confederation, at the same time as Neuchâtel and Valais.
- The accession was signed on **19 May 1815** and Geneva became the 22nd Swiss canton.

The combined municipalities

Around thirty Catholic municipalities in Pays de Gex and Savoy ceded by France (Treaty of Paris, 1815) and Sardinia (Treaty of Turin, 1816) became the so-called *Communes réunies* (combined municipalities) and part of Geneva. The canton thus became of mixed denomination. Its population increased by 16,000 to over 40,000 inhabitants.

The combined municipalities: Aire-la-Ville, Anières, Avusy-Laconnex, Bardonnex, Bernx, Carouge, Carra, Chêne-Thônex, Choulex, Collex-Bossy, Collonge-Bellerive, Compesières, Conflignon, Corsier, Evordes, Grand-Saconnex, Hermance, Lancy, Meinier, Meyrin, Onex, Perly-Certoux, Plan-les-Ouates, Presinge, Pregny, Puplinge, Soral, Troinex, Vandœuvres, Vernier, Versoix, Veyrier.

As a reactionary regime, the Restoration was gradually liberalised from the 1820s onwards. This policy of 'gradual progress' was in part thanks to **Jean-Jacques Rigaud**, a liberal and the first head (*premier syndic*) of the Small Council from 1825 to 1843. He particularly defended lowering the poll tax and annulling the Cantonal government members' status of 'irremovability'. This was, however, still not enough to prevent a radical revolution and the advent of democracy.